

Mr. Donaldson. Mr. President, thanks very much for letting us sit down with you.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was recorded at 2:45 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House on March 10 for broadcast on March 12. In his remarks, the President referred to 6-year-old Kayla Rol-

land, who died after she was shot by 6-year-old classmate Dedrick Owens in Mount Morris Township, MI; Charlton Heston, president, National Rifle Association; and Gov. George W. Bush of Texas. The transcript of this interview was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on March 12. Portions of this interview could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

Remarks at the National League of Cities' Congressional City Conference March 12, 2000

Thank you very much. Mayor Knight, thank you for your leadership of the NLC and for your focus on eliminating racism. Mayor Archer, thank you for your speech and your many years of friendship to Hillary and me. Mayor Anderson; Executive Director Borut; we have the NACo president, Vernon Gray, here today, I know. And I want to thank Mickey Ibarra from the White House for being a good liaison for you and keeping me in touch with you over these years.

Appropriately enough for your commitment, Mr. Mayor, to eliminate racism, I'm thinking today that last Sunday at this time I was in Selma, Alabama, commemorating the 35th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, with John Lewis, Hosea Williams, and many others, and the mayor of Selma, Governor Siegelman. And this time, when the marchers went across the bridge, the State police saluted them rather than beating them up. It was a great, great day.

I was talking last night with a gentleman who's worked in the White House for 28 years—not much older than me—and we were saying that it was hard to believe that when we were young men, people could still be killed for trying to vote in this country. So it's important that we recognize we have come a mighty long way. It is important that we recognize that in the last 7 years, as Dennis outlined, we have come a long way economically and socially.

But I want to focus—even though you were kind to say that, Dennis, I always feel when people talk about me now, I feel like I'm a witness at my own funeral. [Laughter] You know, I have nearly a year left in office and

a lot of energy, and I've got a few ideas about what to do with the remaining time.

So I want to talk to you very briefly today about what I think we should do to be your partner in the endeavor to build this one America, devoid of racial bigotry, and what is involved economically and socially to make that happen. Dr. King said 35 years ago that we would never truly overcome until there was equal economic opportunity and hope for every American. So the first thing I would like to say is, I think it's quite important that we keep this economy going and that we spread its benefits to people and places who have been left behind.

And to me, that means we have to have a big strategy, which is to keep interest rates as low as possible by continuing to pay down the debt; to continue to open markets around the world, which is why I think this China trade agreement's so important. We give up no market access, and they give us unprecedented market access for our farmers, for our manufacturing products, for our services. It's why I think it's important to save enough of this surplus to make sure we can accommodate the retirement of the baby boomers by saving Social Security and Medicare, because I think this is very important to maintain the overall health of the economy and structure of opportunity.

Then I think we need to build on the work that Vice President Gore and I have done for the last 7 years to expand the winner's circle. We increased the earned-income tax credit, which helped lift a couple million more Americans out of poverty. We raised the minimum wage. We passed the family and medical leave law that 20 million Americans have now used to take some time off from work.

But I think we should raise the minimum wage again, and I hope that all of you will support that. I believe we should increase the earned-income tax credit, and particularly try to do more to help parents who have more than two children, because they're actually disadvantaged by the law the way it works today. I think we should increase the number of empowerment zones and enterprise communities, because those that have done it have worked so well.

And I hope you will help me to pass my new markets initiative, which is designed to give businesses the same incentives to invest in Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta and the Rio Grande Valley and our Indian reservations that they now have to invest in Latin America or in Asia or in Africa. I want to continue to push this.

We also supported a special investment of over \$100 million in the Mississippi Delta, which is now the poorest part of America outside the reservations, and another \$1 billion initiative in Indian country, a Southwest border initiative designed to encourage further economic development along our border. All these things are profoundly important, because—you know, it's easy to minimize, and not all our problems are economic, but if people have the dignity of a job, if their children can get education, if there's something to get up in the morning and look forward to, it's a lot easier to bring people together, to eliminate social problems, and to move forward.

One big part of this division we have has become known by the slogan "the digital divide." What it basically means is that access to computers, understanding of how to use them, and access to the Internet and all of its economic and educational opportunities is still divided in this country by region, by income, by level of education, and by race. That's the digital divide.

The bad news is that as we have become a more information-oriented economy, education has acquired a premium, the density of population has been an advantage, and a lot of people have been left behind, and inequality increased for several years. The good news is that the very forces that are powering this economy, education and technology, if made available to people everywhere, can reduce inequality and lift people up.

I'll just give you one little example. I was in Silicon Valley, oh, a couple of months ago, with a lot of executives, young executives from eBay, the Internet trading company. A lot of you have probably bought and sold stuff on eBay. And I learned there that there are 20,000 Americans making a living on eBay, and that—not working for the company, making a living trading on eBay—and that a very significant number of them, according to the company's research, were on welfare not very long ago.

So we can use technology to liberate the energy, the intelligence of the poor, of people who've been left behind—if they have access to it, if they know how to use it, and if the educational opportunities are out there. So bridging the digital divide is a profoundly important part of our ability to build one America, to reduce racial and ethnic tensions, and to give everybody a chance to fulfill their dreams. So I hope you will support that.

And I know many of you are working in your own communities to just do that. In our budget, we have funds to establish 1,000 community computer centers so that adults as well as children—who will benefit from hooking up all the classrooms to the Internet and training all the teachers, another part of our initiative—but adults should be able to benefit as well.

And finally, let me say, I think it's very important that we continue our commitment to educational opportunity, to put more teachers in the classroom, to make sure they're better trained, to get the class size down in the early grades, to give after-school and summer school programs to every child who needs it in every difficult environment in the entire United States, to modernize and repair and build schools so that our kids are in school buildings that are worthy of their dreams. All these things are important.

And one other point that I would like to make that I think is very important is that you have done a magnificent job of making our streets safer. The crime rate is down to a 25-year low, the murder rate to a 30-year low in America. We've tried to be good partners with you: with the 100,000 police on the street—we're trying to give you 50,000 more, now, for high crime areas; with the other support we've given; and the Brady law, which has kept half a million felons, fugitives, and stalkers from getting handguns; and the assault weapons ban. I think these things have made a difference.

But as we have seen again in recent weeks, with the heartbreaking death of little Kayla Roland, the result of a gunshot fired by another little 6-year-old, her own age, and the deaths in Memphis and elsewhere, this is still a country where the crime rate is too high and where there's too much violence.

And I asked the Congress, as soon as the terrible Columbine tragedy hit, to put legislation to do more to protect our children from unnecessary gun violence on a fast track: to close the gun show loophole, to require child safety locks, to ban the importation of large ammunition clips—it's bizarre, you can't make them and sell them in America now; we still allow them to be imported, which undercuts the assault weapons ban—and to hold adults accountable when they knowingly or recklessly allow little children access to guns.

A few days ago, I met with the congressional leadership, the Republicans and the Democrats from the House and the Senate who have control over this bill. And I pointed out that the House and the Senate passed versions of this bill 8 months ago, and the conference committee has still not met once. And that is wrong.

Now, I know that they are under a lot of pressure not to meet. And you know why: because those who don't want any legislation don't want to get caught killing it. So if they don't meet, then hopefully you'll think about something else tomorrow. And this is wrong. This is wrong.

I remember when I signed the Brady bill, after it had been vetoed in the previous administration, you know, there were all these attacks saying this was just a cheap publicity stunt by me, and criminals didn't buy their guns in gun stores, and it wouldn't make any difference at all. Lo and behold, 6½ years later we've got 500,000 felons, fugitives, and stalkers that couldn't get guns. Who knows how many people are alive because of that?

Now, the same people who then said criminals didn't buy guns in gun stores—they bought them from other criminals on the street or at urban flea markets or rural gun shows—now say we shouldn't do background checks at rural gun shows or urban flea markets, unless we can do them instantaneously, because we don't want to inconvenience anyone. Now, let me say to all of you, I actually—I've been out in the country, I mean, in the real country, at one of these rural gun shows. I come from Arkansas.

And I'm missing the SEC championship game right now, talking to you. *[Laughter]* But so is everybody here from Alabama, too, so I forgive you.

So I've been there. There is something to this. But look, there's a way to handle this. And I want to say exactly what the issue is here. We can do 95 percent of the checks we need to do, background checks on people that buy guns at gun shows and urban flea markets, in a day. Ninety to 95, somewhere—anyway, less than 10 percent can't be cleared in a day. But there's some people—particularly since a lot of these occur on the weekends—that can't be cleared in a day, that involve mental health records or certain criminal records. And here's what the hangup is: Of the somewhere between 5 and 10 percent you don't clear in a day, the rejection rate for them under the standards is 20 times higher than the rejection rate of the other 90 percent. So this is not an idle deal here. I don't know about you, but I don't mind being inconvenienced a day or two if it saves another child's life and if it'll save hundreds of children's lives.

So this is profoundly important. And again, I don't think this is much of a partisan issue out there in the cities of America. And it shouldn't be here. Now, I asked the Senate and the House to take action by the anniversary of the Columbine tragedy, on April 20th. And I hope and pray that they will. But we could use a little help from our friends. You could just nudge them along there.

And you need to know that after I had this meeting the other day—I was stunned by this, but after I had this meeting the other day and I thought we were making progress, I then found out there was a movement in the Congress to stop us from giving you money for the gun buyback program. Now, a lot of you have run these gun buyback programs. And I think that's very important, because while you hear all these stories about, "Oh, there are over 200 million guns in America. There's nothing we can do about any of this anyway"—come on, that's true but it's misleading, because a lot of guns are in the hands of serious hunters and sports people, and they're totally secure, and nothing's ever going to happen. A lot of these guns are in the hands of serious collectors, and they're very responsible, and they're protecting them. And a lot of them are out there rolling around, and they're very dangerous. And

a lot of cities, under Republican and Democratic mayors' leadership, have had these gun buyback programs which have actually helped reduce the number of these guns that are out there rolling around.

So again, I ask for your help here. I think we ought to be giving you more money for gun buyback programs, not less. It's totally voluntary, and I think they work.

So, I've said enough about that, but it's a big deal. It's a big deal. I see my friend Mayor Menino down here, and you know, I've been in Boston a lot. I've spent a lot of work and time in Boston. I've watched the crime rate go down there. I saw them go nearly 2 years without a single kid under 18 being killed by a gun. And I saw them do it, and I actually believe racial relations within the community were improving, which is something we—again, I would argue, if you want to build the safest big country in the world, you've got to succeed at the mayor's project here. You can't have the communities pitted against one another. You can't have people who believe the quality of the justice they get and the way they're treated by the police depends upon the color of their skin. And you can't have police believe that they can't be respected in the community because of the color of their uniform.

And the mayors, of all people, and those of you who are in city government, you know this. And if there was ever an argument for getting rid of racism and working through this, it is our desire to make America the safest big country in the world. We will never get there if we don't get there together. And so this whole crime issue is still, I believe, profoundly important.

And finally, let me just say that the longer I serve here and the older I get, and maybe the shorter my tenure of service gets, the more I try to focus on, you know, the big things, the things that will really make a difference over the long run to America. And I—the reason I think this issue of race is so important is that I think it sort of is a magnet for all the fears that people have. It becomes a convenient explanation for all the problems that people have.

And it's not just in this country. You think about the troubles in this old world today. We thought—oh, probably 15 years ago, naively—if we could just win the cold war and nobody believed in communism anymore, then nobody

would want to have these big old bombs and blow people up anymore, and we could go on together to bring the Earth forward. And what have we seen since then? From the Middle East to the Balkans, in Bosnia and Kosovo, to Northern Ireland, to the tribal conflicts of central Africa, all over the world, we see people—and what are they fighting over now? They're fighting over their racial, their ethnic, their religious, their tribal differences, their primal differences, the oldest problems of human society. In the Internet age, people are fighting over our difference from other people.

And once you decide that what's different about you is more important than what you've got in common, then it's not very far from different to dehumanization. And once you get to dehumanization, it's not very difficult to justify violence. And once you think you're beating up on somebody who's not really somebody after all, it's not very far from there to get to killing them. And so you had in Rwanda 800,000 people, more or less, killed in 100, 120 days, most of them without the benefit of a gun. Can you imagine that? Most of them with machetes and sticks. And you had one million people driven from their homes in Kosovo because they were Muslims. And on and on and on.

And I'm honored that the United States is in a position to try to minimize those problems and heal those wounds. But make no mistake about it, we won't be able to do that over the long run, we won't be able to do good around the world, unless we are good here at home.

And a lot of this work is something that you have to do. You know, when Matthew Shepard's put out on a rack in Wyoming, or James Byrd's dragged to death in Texas, or those little kids at the school in Los Angeles were shot at because they were Jewish, or a Filipino worker was killed because he was Asian and he worked for the Federal Government, or that Korean Christian was shot coming out of his church in the Middle West, all those things—the former basketball coach at Northwestern murdered walking on the street because he was an African-American—when those things happen, there are things we can do. We ought to pass the hate crimes legislation. We ought to pass the employment nondiscrimination legislation. We ought to put more police on the street in the high-crime areas. There are things we can do.

But fundamentally, we have to get people to define their worth and their merit in ways that

are affirmative, not negative. We have to get people to understand that this brilliant new human genome project is uncovering the fact that we are genetically 99.9 percent the same. And I know that's tough for some people to deal with. When I said that in the State of the Union Address, in the House Chamber, the Republicans and the Democrats looked at each other in total disbelief. *[Laughter]* I mean, we've got to think all this stuff really matters. You know, we all get all puffed up.

I want to tell you, just in that vein, I keep on a little table—you've seen these pictures of these meetings I have in the Oval Office? You know, there's two chairs; the President sits in one, somebody else sits in the other, and then there's two little couches, and there's a table. Well, on that table, I now have a vacuum-packed Moon rock that Neil Armstrong gave me when he came in and we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Moon landing last year.

And the thing I want you to know about this Moon rock is, it is 3.6 billion years old. So I leave it right there on the table. And then people get so exercised and angry, and they're talking about this, you know. And I say, "Time out. See that rock there? It's 3.6 billion years old. We're just passing through. Chill out, here." *[Laughter]* We're just passing through.

I want you to laugh about it, but it does, it kind of puts it in perspective, doesn't it? You've got to see all these things in perspective.

I heard a cute story the other day. You know what a snail says when he's riding on a turtle's back? Whee! *[Laughter]* I mean, it all depends on your—you've got to—I'm telling you, I'm having a little fun, but this is a big deal. I mean, how you look at these things is everything.

It's funny, isn't it? After we live our lives and we turn gray—the mayor and I, anyway; Dennis wishes he could turn gray—*[laughter]*—and you think about all the things you learned and how hard you worked and all the stuff you think you did. And then you strip it all away, and what really matters is what you told your kids when they were little. You know, what's in your heart? And how do you view your neighbor? And can you love your neighbor as yourself? And who is your neighbor, anyway?

So I say to you, I'm happy about the way we're starting the new century. I believe we can reach all of our big goals. But I think that your leader here is right. We can reach all the rest of them if we do it together. And some of what we have to do we can legislate, and some of what we have to do is an affair of the heart. But the real trick in life is to take what is right in the heart and make it live in life. And that requires systematic, sustained, organized effort.

I watched them in Boston. They didn't have no racism in the police department overnight and by accident, and they still have challenges with it. But they train to do the right thing. They work to do the right thing. It is a disciplined effort. You have to care about these things.

So we will do our part. But I came here more than anything else to thank you for the last 7 years and to tell you that this mayor and this program is the most important thing you could be doing today. If on this Sunday the good Lord came to me and said, "Your time on Earth is over, and you've got to check out today, and you don't get to finish your term. And I'm not a genie; I'm not about to give you three wishes"—*[laughter]*—"but you can have one," I wouldn't wish for continued prosperity. I wouldn't wish for finding outer galaxies, to see if there's life there. I would wish for our country to be one America.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:05 p.m. in the International Ballroom at the Washington Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Donald J. Borut, executive director, and Mayors Bob Knight of Wichita, KS, president, Dennis W. Archer of Detroit, MI, first vice president, and Karen J. Anderson of Minnetonka, MN, second vice president, National League of Cities (NLC); C. Vernon Gray, president, National Association of Counties (NACo); civil rights activist Hosea Williams; Mayor Joe T. Smitherman of Selma, AL; Gov. Don Siegelman of Alabama; Mayor Thomas M. Menino of Boston, MA; and former astronaut Neil Armstrong.